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# THE RIGHT TO THE CITY AS THE RIGHT TO DIFFERENCE

- UNDERSTANDING THE RIGHT TO THE CITY AS THE  
RIGHT TO DIFFERENCE

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- THE RIGHT TO THE CITY: FROM THE STREET  
TO GLOBALISATION

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**T**his paper introduces some of the core ideas of this volume, elaborating on the right to the city from the viewpoint of the right to difference. The main question it tackles is how far the right to the city contains and can eventually convey the right to difference. This question is explored in theoretical terms, from a sociological perspective, drawing on selective empirical evidence. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part introduces the right to the city. The second part brings the right to difference into conversation with the right to the city and introduces the right to a different city as one way of understanding the right to the city as the right to difference. The third part reflects on agents, processes and issues involved in the realisation of the right to a different city.

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### **I. Introducing the right to the city**

Since its origin the idea of the right to the city has taken many forms. Originally developed by Lefebvre (1968) as part of a broader attempt to anchor Marxism to the urban dimension of capitalism, in the right to the city, the “urban” provides the epistemology and scale for a new social and political revolution (Lefebvre, 2003; Prigge, 2008). Central to the idea of the right to the city is the primacy given to use as opposed to exchange value, against powerful economic interests in the city and its space. Emphasis placed on use is, in turn, to be understood in the context of Lefebvre’s critique of everyday life, in which the everyday becomes the level of analysis of oppression as well as a possibility for reinventing the city based on people’s needs and creative forces.

That said, the right to the city has subsequently been appropriated to fit a variety of programmes and ideas about cities, rights and justice. For Kuymulu, the notion of the right to the city “is increasingly becoming a conceptual vortex, pulling together discordant political projects that frame the urban problematic around democracy and human rights” (2013: 924). At the same time, the current association between the right to the city and radical democratic projects for cities is undisputed (Purcell, 2008; Garcia-Chueca, 2016). In line with its original

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formulation, the right to the city continues to evoke participatory and user-centred approaches to city government and the management and organisation of space to combat the capitalist exploitation and neoliberal governance of the city (Purcell, 2002; Sugranyes and Mathivet, 2011; Belda-Miquel et al., 2016). Eventually, Purcell argues that the right to the city entails two main rights held by the inhabitants of the city: first, the right to participation “in any decision that contributes to the production of urban space” (2002: 102); and, second, the right to appropriation, which “includes the right of inhabitants to physically access, occupy and use urban space” (2002: 103).

Despite focussing on the city, the right to the city is not necessarily the city’s responsibility alone. Cities and their local authorities are best understood as part of a state whose powers and competences are nowadays articulated across a variety of levels of government and dispersed across multiple specialised bodies and agencies. Purcell (2006) warns against surrendering to the idea that local problems can only be found at city level and within one city, in a way that emphasises the “multiscalar” nature of the right to the city. The example of Brazil suggests that the city is the space in which the right to the city is practiced and ultimately realised. Municipalities are also inevitably involved in the production of the right to the city, if only because of the powers and competences they retain in urban planning and the management of space. The same case, however, clearly shows how the broader framework for and regulation of the right to the city came from state legislation (the City Statute, in 2001) and established an ad-hoc institution (the Ministry of Cities, in 2003) (Maricato, 2011; Garcia-Chueca, 2016). As such, it is important to maintain a sophisticated and strategic approach to how different scales of politics and government, not only the city, can contribute to but also hinder the practice of the right to the city.

While some form of institutionalisation of the right to the city appears desirable (Purcell 2008), right to the city “policy” raises concerns about what has been lost of the community-oriented, activist spirit of the idea of the right to the city. Empirical studies show resistance to some of the more radical implications of the right to the city, such as those around the approval of urban plans (Maricato, 2011). At the same time, there is evidence of support and receptivity amongst civil servants and street-level bureaucrats (Belda-Miquel et al., 2016), meaning those agents who already play a key role in the more general delivery of social policy. Overall, as also suggested by the study of human rights in cities (Grigolo, 2019), institutionalisation both enables and constrains the right to the city within a political context that tends to favour the adaptation of the concept to the imperatives of neoliberalism.

## II. Bringing the right to difference into the conversation

Difference is understood here as the line that divides people according to characteristics such as class, gender, sex, ethnicity, race (understood as a social construction and not as a biological factor), citizenship, and disability. From a sociological viewpoint, these differences, class included, are social divisions. Social divisions never operate in isolation from each other but rather combine to produce sometimes very specific

“intersectional” experiences of difference. Based on these premises, the right to difference may be seen as the right of social groups and communities defined by one or more difference to have their difference(s) acknowledged and, in terms of public action, fully considered in the definition and implementation of policy. Recognition of difference always raises some issues around redistribution of resources and political representation (see Fraser and Honneth, 2003). It entails the right to have difference elicited to the extent that it leads to undue and unfair attention, but also emphasised as a source of social enrichment and positive transformation.

Integrating the right to difference into the right to the city draws attention to the “special relationship” that exists today between difference and the city. The increasing urbanisation of the global population has been accompanied by a process of differentiation of the same population. Cities produce but also attract differences, because of the opportunities cities offer to different groups and communities. For instance, big cities, in particular, offer migrant communities job opportunities in a variety of markets. Cities have also offered LGBTQI+ people the level of anonymity and the possibility of experimenting with sexuality and gender that are usually not available in small towns and villages.

At the same time persisting inequalities in cities interrogate the power of differences (as social divisions) to shape the material and social space of the city. In fact, we may argue that marginalisation, exclusion and segregation generated by difference are typical urban phenomena and that programmes of austerity stimulated by (the crisis of) neoliberalism have arguably contributed to their intensification. From these premises, achieving what we could define as a positive “indifference to difference” in the city requires exposing urban inequalities by placing differences at the centre of processes of reconfiguration and reorganisation of the city in order to redress urban inequalities around issues such as class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and disability.

This process is, to be clear, primarily political. In this respect, cities not only offer a venue for the recognition of difference at symbolic and material levels; cities are also spaces for the political organisation and representation of communities defined by difference(s). The presence of difference in the city produces, on the one hand, a mobilisation of communities seeking to give voice and representation to their difference and, on the other hand, a response from the state, including the local state in the form of municipal authorities, via different arrangements, policies and laws that recognise and regulate difference. This politics of difference is also an identity politics, the city has often been its stage and municipal authorities one of the main targets of community action for political recognition. As Isin (2000) suggests when discussing global cities, these have become crucial spaces for claiming rights. Quite significantly, but not surprisingly, much of the conversation going on in cities around human rights concerns questions of difference, discrimination and equality (Grigolo, 2019).

Lefebvre does include difference in the right to the city (Goonewardena et al., 2008), but in ways that have sometimes been found wanting. Gender provides a useful lens here for reflecting on the multiple, ambivalent relations between the rights to the city and to difference. On the one hand, as

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Garcia-Chueca (2018) argues, Lefebvre and feminist authors like Doreen Massey criticise both modern rational urbanism and ways of ordering the city that marginalise unwanted subjects: the lower classes (expelled to the periphery of the city) and women (confined to the domestic space). On the other hand, Fenster (2005: 68) observes that Lefebvre understands difference as the question of how particularities are forced into dominant and hegemonic categories. From these premises, she stresses the absence in Lefebvre's work of an analysis of oppression within the private sphere, where many women continue to experience inequalities. Accordingly, Fenster argues for the right to the *gendered* city, a right to the city in which a feminist perspective is fully incorporated into the right to the city in order to "open" the right to the city to the private sphere.

If the right to the gendered city seems to solve, at least conceptually, the tension between gender and the right to the city, from the viewpoint adopted here it nevertheless leaves unresolved other possible tensions between difference (beyond gender) and the right to the city. In this vein, we can rethink the right to the city *through* difference as *the right to a different city*: the right to produce a city that is connected – in its representation as well as its material reality – to the lived experiences of differences that, because they inhabit the "urban", both shape and are shaped by it. The right to a different city raises awareness of the differentiated nature of the city, and promotes a more comprehensive understanding and fulfilment of the right to the city. Overall, the right to a different city may be primarily the right of social groups and communities defined by difference to make decisions about and appropriate the urban space. In the right to a different city, the use value of space becomes central, as against the exchange value imposed by the neoliberal order in which cities are (re)produced.

Before considering what the realisation of this right entails, it is important to stress that the meaning of a "different city" is by no means set in stone. Rather, the right to a different city draws attention to ongoing and ever-changing dynamics of differentiation amongst the city's population. As such, the right to a different city is closely intertwined with the classed, gendered, racialised, sexualised and disabling characteristics of the urban space. At the same time, the right to a different city is receptive of new, emerging forms of cultural and economic oppression experienced by social groups and communities defined by difference(s) that may at any point become socially relevant (e.g. migrants when discussing issues of nationality and citizenship). In line with these premises, the right to a different city is best understood as an open-ended and dynamic concept: as a discursive arena and political standpoint available to different social groups for criticising the social and material order of the city in order to promote their active re-appropriation and transformation of the "urban".

### III. Realising the right to a different city

The right to a different city is about *becoming* a different city. At the centre of this process are the actions and mobilisation of the groups and communities that, by making claims based on and driven by difference, convey their own vision of how the city should look. By raising their voices, directly or through some form of collective representation, mem-

bers of social groups defined by difference begin to exercise their right to appropriate urban space and participate in its use and management. Rights and human rights provide an important language for articulating difference as a matter of justice and can complement an approach based on the right to the city in many ways. For example, human rights can help women articulate oppression in the private sphere, including violence, a claim which we can then reconsider as part and parcel of the right to the city as far as it hinders women's use of the city and, because of that, their right to a different (gendered) city. Cultural rights enabling artistic expression should be included here as well. The literature on the right to the city provides interesting examples of the centrality of creativity in the production of the right to the city (Iveson, 2013). From our standpoint, art plays a crucial role in voicing and representing difference in the conversation about the city: the urban space constitutes the social source of art as well as the material structure on and through which the artistic expression of difference is conveyed.

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Public authorities also play an important part in the production of a different city and, of course, in the respect, protection and fulfilment of (human) rights. As far as local governments are "close" and sensitised to difference and the communities defined by it, while also retaining important responsibilities in the area of urban planning and management, they are also the part of the state most obviously concerned with the construction of the different city. Municipalities may play the role of a facilitator, working towards enabling groups and communities defined by difference to exercise their rights and freedoms and (continue to) build the different city. Policies centred on difference and its recognition contribute to the right to a different city. Cities have spoken and developed the language of diversity and equality for a long time. Antidiscrimination policies can help redress behaviours that inhibit the use of the city by residents defined by difference. The law can be a precious ally in fighting discrimination in cities: from international human rights treaties to local ordinances and regulations, many laws that converge and "compete" for their own application in the city can be used to redress discriminatory behaviour and eventually socialise city residents into non-discriminatory conduct (Grigolo, 2019). As the case of Barcelona's Office for Non-Discrimination shows, municipalities have some margin of effective intervention on specific instances of discrimination, in collaboration with public prosecutors but also relying on mediation and referral to city services (Grigolo, 2010; 2019).

However, to realise the right to a different city anti-discrimination policy is not enough. The structural inequalities that shape the urban experience of members of social groups defined by difference must be tackled. A focus on the structural dimension of inequality interrogates the ambivalent relation between, on the one hand, difference and, on the other, the neoliberal order of cities in which difference is experienced, imagined, spoken, acted and eventually recognised. Unpacking this relationship is often a difficult exercise, especially since neoliberalism has co-opted difference and identity politics into strategies of marketisation, participating in some way in the recognition of difference while at the same time exploiting it for profit. If the celebration of diversity has certainly helped LGBTQI+ people to engage positively with the city, its association with city strategies to boost the local economy has contributed to the marketisation of gay identities and the de-politicisation of

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pride parades, something which has disappointed some LGBTQI+ activists (on the case of Barcelona, for example, see Grigolo, 2019). Migrants and newcomers in general – central to the promotion of “diverse cities” – continue to represent a useful source of (cheap) labour for local economies. At the same time, maintaining the profitability of the city space implies the securitisation of the urban space through law-and-order measures that particularly target marginal communities of migrants, including sex workers (Grigolo 2019).

In the same vein, we should reflect on how much urban “diversity” can participate in processes of gentrification aimed at attracting more affluent, “creative” classes towards the centre of cities at the expense of lower classes (Grigolo, 2017). Research has shown how institutional venues in which “diversity” is spoken are in fact populated by middle-classes (Hoekstra, 2015). As such, diversity emerges almost as, to put it in Bourdieusian terms, an element of “distinction” between classes and eventually a form of symbolic violence exercised by middle- and upper- classes towards the lower-classes. Infused with *exclusiveness* more than just exclusion, a positive emphasis placed on diversity in cities can sustain urban marginalisation processes, something which is entirely at odds with the theory and practice of the right to the city and that, unfortunately, can be exploited and manipulated by right-wing political associations eager to promote themselves as defenders of the “people” against the “elites”.

As such, realising the right to a different city stretches beyond the right to a diverse city, as far as diversity is understood solely or mainly through a “liberal focus on the celebration of pluralism” (Garcia Chueca, 2018, my translation) that maintains diversity within the purpose and scope of a neoliberal practice of the city. Rather, central to the right to a different city is the question of how capitalism affects the urban experience of those groups and communities defined by difference in a more comprehensive way, with an understanding that this experience should be spoken and articulated by members of groups and communities, including the lower classes, as part of their exercise of the right to a different city. For this reason, it is crucial that these subjects gain access to those institutional venues in which decisions are made that affect their experience and use of the city. These venues include agencies and departments with power over the regulation of relevant policy areas (e.g. planning and housing) as well as council and advisory bodies in which the voice of neighbours and communities are supposed to be heard and to influence policy across a wide spectrum of issues. It goes without saying that achieving at least some degree of control over any significant law or policy affecting difference will meet with significant resistance, especially in those areas in which strategic choices are made over the planning, transformation and “regeneration” of the space of the city. Achieving concrete results may well imply influencing decisions from outside institutions, by engaging in demonstration and protest.

As a conclusion, the right to a different city can be understood in a dynamic way: as a project which is hardly fully realised and a process that should be sustained by social action, political organisation and public intervention. It is a right co-produced by groups, communities and institutions with a stake in it, not least via their engagement with difference, under the influence of a broader political, social and, most



importantly, economic environment which imposes certain rules on the actors within it. In this respect, at least two broad issues must be considered to account for some challenging aspects of the right to a different city. Firstly, while this right has an obvious connection to urban life and environment, its realisation invites attention to be drawn to what happens outside of the city that influences the perception and agency of social groups defined by difference. In line with the theorisation of the right to the city discussed at the outset of this chapter, the politics of the right to a different city should be fought at the scale at which questions that affect urban groups and communities are or become politicised, and decisions over them are made. That said, moving and mobilising across scales requires resources and skills that are not always readily available to communities and their organisations.

Secondly, the right to a different city in its fuller sense cannot be realised without sharing differences and turning differences into a collective project of and for all city users. This is about, on the one hand, acknowledging that social groups are internally divided and defined by more than one difference. Fenster's (2005) research, for example, show that women are never just women and that they experience the city based also on their ethnic, national and/or class identity. The intersectional character of the urban experience requires the political alliance between groups to be identified and organised by difference. In this way, the right to a different city can reflect the variety of urban experiences of difference and eventually the conflicts and tensions between these experiences. The right to a different city requires discussions and negotiations between groups and communities, and the transformation of those communities through the acknowledgement and sharing of (other) differences.

On the other hand, to realise the right to a different city it is crucial that all the city's inhabitants engage with difference(s) to produce that different city. By turning differences into a shared project for the city, the risk of their compartmentalisation should be minimised, as should that of communities being singled out and "distinguished" in the sense discussed above. Eventually, collectivising difference is about realising that each user of the city is different in some way, and that this particularity should become part of the production of a different city.

## IV. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the relationship between the right to the city and the right to difference, and suggested the former should be a conceptual and practical tool that embodies and sustains the latter. This exploration, admittedly selective and partial, has been guided by the idea that the two rights should come together to realise the right to a different city, one in which the urban experience of social groups and communities defined by difference is placed strategically at the centre of the right to the city. At the same time, I have tried to suggest, first, how our understanding of and approach to difference, at social and political levels, should remain open to the many forms in which established and emerging differences operate and intersect in the city, including class differences; and, second, how for the sake of both the right to the city and the right to difference, differences should be shared and collectivised.

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